

Underwater Echoes by LilRachity

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Summary: Maybe he was crazy, or depressed, or both. But he was convinced he could feel her, her presence, at times. When the wind blew just right, or the sun beamed down a certain way, he would get a tingle, a feeling, (like a ripple between worlds?) that she was reaching out to him, from somewhere far away.

Underwater Echoes

It was easy to pretend she never existed. When the lights were on and his mind was distracted by his friends' smiles, Mike could laugh and smile back. Feelings were easy to hide, to shove down deep and keep bottled. He had to be strong, to show the guys he could move on.

The four of them were together again. Part of Mike was relieved and he clung to this normalcy as though it were a lifeline. Dustin and Lucas would crack jokes about each other until it inevitably led to another one of their back-and-forth squabbles in which Mike would have to butt in and fulfill his role of the peacemaker. Will would sit there quietly, smiling and giggling along every so often as his hand doodled his latest drawing. Their friendship had been tested because of Will's disappearance, but it had come out stronger in the end.

Before, he had been satisfied with these long nights of Dungeons and Dragons.

Before the Upside Down.

Before the Demogorgon.

Before *her*.

But when his friends went home, and he was laying in the dark of his bedroom, the choking loneliness crept in and haunted Mike until he fell asleep somehow. Night after night, the darkness became thicker, heavier. The reality of El's absence sank in. And it was all Mike's fault.

You were supposed to protect her, to keep her safe. How could you break your promise?

Friends don't lie.

How could you let her go? How could you try to forget?

A friend is someone you would do anything for.

You are worthless. You are nothing.

Goodbye Mike...

And then the morning came, after nightmares of broken promises and self-sacrifice. He usually woke stiff and red-eyed, twisted in a cocoon of bed sheets, as though he hasn't slept at all. He could feel time slipping away from him. He trudged through the monotony of daily life as though he were walking through molasses.

School was hauntingly dull. Not even Mr. Clarke's once-captivating science classes were enough to hold his interest. After alternate dimensions and sensory deprivation and monster hunting, enzymes and proteins are just sort of...beneath you.

His mother never asked why he started sleeping down in the basement. Or why he freaked out when she tried to clean up the little blanket fort he made. It was just a play fort, for heaven's sake, and she was only trying to wash the old blankets that had been gathering dust for months now. Oh well. Boys will be boys.

Maybe he was crazy, or depressed, or both. But he was convinced he could feel her, her presence, at times. When the wind blew just right, or the sun beamed down a certain way, he would get a tingle, a feeling, (*like a ripple between worlds?*) that she was reaching out to him, from somewhere far away.

Day in and day out, he stayed in the blanket fort. Their connection was strongest here. He could feel it, couldn't he? His place was here, standing guard, waiting for her.

Mike tried to convince himself that she was getting closer. That she was fighting her way back to him, the way she had fought the Bad Men and the Demogorgon. She had clawed her way out of that hellish laboratory only to send herself back to a barren, frozen wasteland. Not that he knew from experience. Will didn't like to bring it up. He would get skittish and awkward and silently stare at his shoes whenever the subject arose. And Mike had only heard Nancy talk about her brief moment in the Upside Down once (only because he pried it out of her) and once was more than enough to make his head echo with nightmarish worry.

What if she's dead?

She's not! Don't even think it, Wheeler.

Will she come back?

She will. She has to.

What's happening to El?

You don't really want to know.

He didn't. He tried not to think about it.

Mike launched campaigns to find her – the proud princess, locked in a castle in an alternate dimension guarded by ferocious mythical creatures like the Demogorgon and the Thesslehydra. If there was any way his friends could focus their minds on how to rescue El, this was it. He knew his friends would stop at nothing to complete their quests, come Hell or high water.

"How can we get her back? There must be a way. No, Lucas, I've tried to go back to the gate. It's still locked up behind fences and guarded by soldiers. But how can we contact her? It was so easy for her to just manipulate the radio and... No, Dustin, we tried searching Mirkwood, and we never saw any signs of her... Do you have any ideas Will? That's okay, we'll all think of something. Come on guys, think. Think!"

His friends tried to play along, tried to look on the bright side. But the more time moved on, the more they had to err on the side of logic – El was never coming back. They started to become aware of Mike's downward spiral. Yet each of them handled the situation differently.

Will politely skirted around the issue of El, never having known her in person though he faintly remembered her warm presence in the Upside Down. He listened intently to the other boy's stories, curious about the girl who helped save his life.

"Do you remember when she flipped the van? That was awesome!"

"What about the time she broke Troy's arm?!"

"Haha, he didn't even talk to us for a month!"

"Man, she was so cool!"

"Is. She *is* so cool."

"Yeah, yeah. That's what I meant."

Then the stories would cease. The boys let silence settle between them. The memories grew cold.

"I wish I could have met her," Will would always say with a sad smile, feeling that he missed out on a grand adventure.

"You will," Mike reassured him. "She's out there. We're going to find her."

"I hope so." Will was always supportive of Mike, even when he had his own doubts.

It was Dustin's responsibility to take Mike's mind off El; he was clearly beating himself up over what happened to her. He shouldn't feel so guilty, it wasn't his fault. The curly-haired boy would talk about the latest comic book he read or the newest project for the Hawkins A.V. Club. Most often, he would crack jokes, trying to make Mike laugh.

"Hey guys, what do you call a dog who loves to take baths?"

A sigh. "What Dustin?"

"A sham-POODLE! Get it, shampoo? Poodle? Sham-poodle?"

Will giggled. "I get it."

Lucas rolled his eyes. "Where did you get that stupid joke? Off of a Popsicle stick?"

"Screw you, Lucas! It's funny!"

Mike would only show a stale smile.

Lucas, the most impatient of the group, would try to offer advice at first. As time moved on, he became more and more frustrated. Why was Mike acting like he was the only one of them who had lost someone? They had all befriended El and this was hard for them to accept too.

One Saturday, the three boys found Mike in his usual sulk, cloaked in the shadows of the basement, staring at the blanket fort that was once hers. A shared glance between them confirmed that they all had the same thought: Mike was spending far too much time down here, more than was healthy.

"Come on Mike," Will started slowly, carefully. "Let's go outside and ride our bikes around. Maybe we can head down to the game shop and see if they have any new comic books."

No answer.

"Or maybe we could head to the arcade," Dustin suggested. "And then we could swing by the ice cream shop. I've been craving some rocky road all day – "

"You always think about food." Lucas rolled his eyes. "That's your answer for everything."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's the middle of March!"

"So?"

"So, you can't eat ice cream when it's freezing cold outside!"

"Says *who*?!"

"Guys!" Will piped up, before the two friends could start another argument. His voice dropped to a whisper. "This is about Mike..."

Lucas tried a more practical approach to confront the situation. "Come on, man. You've been down here too long. You need some fresh air."

The guys didn't understand. Here, Mike was the closest he would ever get to her. He could *feel* her. She was trying to reach him. And he was trying to reach her. He couldn't just leave...

Lucas reached for Mike's arm, trying to pull him up to his feet. "Come on, Mike. Let's go – "

"No," Mike whined, trying to wriggle free from Lucas' grasp. "I'm fine. You guys go ahead."

"Mike," Lucas said seriously. "You can't stay down here forever. Come out with us, it will help clear your head."

"I'm fine. I'm just a little tired," Mike lied. He felt Lucas stand him up. His legs stiffened under him as he became face-to-face with the other boy.

"Come on," Lucas steered the boy towards the stairs. "Let's go."

"No," Mike repeated, firmer this time. "I don't want to."

"It doesn't matter if you *want* to! You're wasting your life down here." Lucas was dragging him now.

"No!" Mike tore his arm away with surprising ferocity. "I'll stay down here and wait for her for the rest of my life if I have to!"

Lucas felt himself snap. That stupid blanket fort needed to go.

"She's not coming back, Mike! Do you hear me? She's dead! You don't need any of this shit anymore, Mike!" Lucas kicked over the chair that propped up the blankets.

"*Lucas!*" Mike's eyes widened in horror.

"You don't need this!" He ripped down the blankets.

"Lucas *stop!* Please," Mike pleaded.

"Or these!" He roughly threw the pillows across the room.

"...Stop..."

All four boys gaped silently at the corner of the basement. The blanket fort was destroyed. Mike sank to the floor, in shock.

"I'm going home," Lucas huffed. "I don't have time for this wild goose chase anymore." He dashed from the room and went upstairs. The boys heard the front door slam.

"Oh my God, Mike. Are you okay?" Will rushed over to his friend's side.

"Yeah, that was a really messed up thing to do," Dustin chimed in. "What a jerk."

"Just leave me alone..." Mike choked.

"Mike, it's okay," Will said soothingly. "It will be okay."

"Yeah, we can help you rebuild it." Dustin attempted to pick up the chair Lucas had kicked over. "No worries."

"STOP!" Mike yelled. Dustin froze. "Just leave me alone! Get out! *GET OUT!*"

Dustin was about to speak when Will piped up quietly, calmly. "Okay Mike, we'll go." Will grabbed Dustin by the arm and pulled him up the basement stairs, leaving Mike alone.

Mike looked at the tangled heap of blankets strewn around the basement like shattered glass. His vision blurred as hot tears dragged lightly down his cheeks. His throat tightened and his stomach twisted with despair. He couldn't feel her anymore.

A/N:

Guys, I'm absolutely over the moon for Stranger Things. I've been reading other ST fanfics since Day 1 and it's been amazing to see this fandom grow in the last several months. This little story isn't outlined

to be very long, but who knows what will happen. Just a warning though - there will be angst and anger and tears. This is going to be an emotional ride. I hope you stay tuned! Reviews are appreciated!